

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Behar – Bechukotai
May 13, 2023 *** 22 Iyar, 5783

Parasha in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2904/jewish/Behar-Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, “Behar,” means “on Mount [Sinai]” and it is found in Leviticus 25:1. The name of the Parshah, “Bechukotai,” means “in My statutes” and it is found in Leviticus 26:3.

On the mountain of Sinai, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the Sabbatical year: every seventh year, all work on the land should cease, and its produce becomes free for the taking for all, man and beast.

Seven Sabbatical cycles are followed by a fiftieth year—the Jubilee year, on which work on the land ceases, all indentured servants are set free, and all ancestral estates in the Holy Land that have been sold revert to their original owners.

Additional laws governing the sale of lands, and the prohibitions against fraud and usury, are also given.

G-d promises that if the people of Israel will keep His commandments, they will enjoy material prosperity and dwell securely in their homeland. But He also delivers a harsh “rebuke,” warning of the exile, persecution and other evils that will befall them if they abandon their covenant with Him. Nevertheless, “Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the L-rd their G-d.”

The Parshah concludes with the rules on how to calculate the values of different types of pledges made to G-d, and the mitzvah of tithing produce and livestock.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell - Jeremiah 16:19-17:14.](#)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/877065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The haftarah discusses the punishments that await those who disregard G-d's law, and the blessings that are the lot of those who follow the Creator's wishes. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading which details at length the blessings and curses.

The prophet Jeremiah rebukes the people of Israel for their idolatrous ways and for not having faith in G-d. He conveys G-d's words of wrath towards those who do not put their trust in Him — foretelling exile as their punishment — and of

blessings for those who do.

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and relies on mortal flesh for his strength, and whose heart turns away from the G-d. He shall be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when good comes, and will dwell on parched land in the desert, on salt-sodden soil that is not habitable. Blessed is the man who trusts in the G-d, to whom G-d will be his trust. For he shall be like a tree planted by the water, and which spreads its roots out into a stream, so it will not be affected when heat comes, and its leaves shall be green, and in the year of drought will not be anxious, neither shall it cease from bearing fruit."

The haftorah ends with the following poignant verses: "G-d who is the source of the hopes of Israel, all that forsake You shall be shamed, and they who turn away from me shall be marked out on the earth that they have forsaken G-d, the source of living waters. Heal me, O G-d, then shall I be healed; help me, then I shall be helped, for You are my praise!"

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Family Feeling: Behar – Bechukotai by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/family-feeling/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/family-feeling/>

I argued in my Covenant and Conversation for parshat Kedoshim that Judaism is more than an ethnicity. It is a call to holiness. In one sense, however, there is an important ethnic dimension to Judaism.

It is best captured in the 1980s joke about an advertising campaign in New York. Throughout the city there were giant posters with the slogan, "You have a friend in the Chase Manhattan Bank." Underneath one, an Israeli had scribbled the words, "But in Bank Leumi you have mishpacha." Jews are, and are conscious of being, a single extended family.

This is particularly evident in this week's parsha. Repeatedly we read of social legislation couched in the language of family:

When you buy or sell to your neighbour, let no one wrong his brother. Lev. 25:14

If your brother becomes impoverished and sells some of his property, his near redeemer is to come to you and redeem what his brother sold.

Lev. 25:25

If your brother is impoverished and indebted to you, you must support him; he must live with you like a foreign resident. Do not take interest or profit from him, but fear your God and let your brother live with you.

Lev. 25:35-36

If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him

like a slave. Lev. 25:39

“Your brother” in these verses is not meant literally. At times it means “your relative”, but mostly it means “your fellow Jew”. This is a distinctive way of thinking about society and our obligations to others. Jews are not just citizens of the same nation or adherents of the same faith. We are members of the same extended family. We are – biologically or electively – children of Abraham and Sarah. For the most part, we share the same history. On the festivals we relive the same memories. We were forged in the same crucible of suffering. We are more than friends. We are mishpacha, family.

The concept of family is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. Consider the book of Genesis, the Torah’s starting-point. It is not primarily about theology, doctrine, dogma. It is not a polemic against idolatry. It is about families: husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters.

At key moments in the Torah, God Himself defines His relationship with the Israelites in terms of family. He tells Moses to say to Pharaoh in His name: “**My child, My firstborn, Israel**” (Ex. 4:22). When Moses wants to explain to the Israelites why they have a duty to be holy, He answers, “**You are children of the Lord your God**” (Deut. 14:1). If God is our parent, then we are all brothers and sisters. We are related by bonds that go to the very heart of who we are.

The prophets continued the metaphor. There is a lovely passage in Hosea in which the prophet describes God as a parent teaching a young child how to take its first faltering steps: “**When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son ... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms ... To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.**” (Hosea 11:1-4).

The same image is continued in rabbinic Judaism. In one of the most famous phrases of prayer, Rabbi Akiva used the words Avinu Malkeinu, “Our Father, our King”. That is a precise and deliberate expression. God is indeed our sovereign, our lawgiver and our judge, but before He is any of these things He is our parent and we are His children. That is why we believe divine compassion will always override strict justice.

This concept of Jews as an extended family is powerfully expressed in Maimonides’ Laws of Charity:

The entire Jewish people and all those who attach themselves to them are like brothers, as [Deuteronomy 14:1] states: “You are children of the Lord your God.” And if a brother will not show mercy to a brother, who will show mercy to them? To whom do the poor of Israel lift up their eyes? To the Gentiles who hate them and pursue them? Their eyes are turned to their brethren alone.[1]

This sense of kinship, fraternity and the family bond, is at the heart of the idea of Kol Yisrael arevin zeh bazeh, “All Jews are responsible for one another.” Or as Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai put it, “When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain.”[2] Why is Judaism built on this model of the family? Partly to tell us that God did not choose an elite of the righteous or a sect of the likeminded. He chose a family – Abraham and Sarah’s descendants – extended through time. The family is the most powerful vehicle of continuity, and the kinds of changes Jews were expected to make to the world could not be achieved in a single generation. Hence the importance of the family as a place of education (“You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children ...”) and of handing the story on, especially on Pesach through the Seder service.

Another reason is that family feeling is the most primal and powerful moral bond. The scientist J. B. S. Haldane famously said, when asked whether he would jump into a river and risk his life to save his drowning brother, “No, but I would do so to save two brothers or eight cousins.” The point he was making was that we share 50 per cent of our genes with our siblings, and an eighth with our cousins. Taking a risk to save them is a way of ensuring that our genes are passed on to the next generation. This principle, known as “kin selection”, is the most basic form of human altruism. It is where the moral sense is born.

That is a key insight, not only of biology but also of political theory. Edmund Burke famously said that “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.”[3] Likewise Alexis de Tocqueville said, “As long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone.”[4]

Strong families are essential to free societies. Where families are strong, a sense of altruism exists that can be extended outward, from family to friends to neighbours to community and from there to the nation as a whole.

It was the sense of family that kept Jews linked in a web of mutual obligation despite the fact that they were scattered across the world. Does it still exist? Sometimes the divisions in the Jewish world go so deep, and the insults hurled by one group against another are so brutal that one could almost be persuaded that it does not. In the 1950s Martin Buber expressed the belief that the Jewish people in the traditional sense no longer existed. Knesset Yisrael, the covenantal people as a single entity before God, was no more. The divisions between Jews, religious and secular, orthodox and non-orthodox, Zionist and non-Zionist, had, he thought, fragmented the people beyond hope of repair.

Yet that conclusion is premature for precisely the reason that makes family so elemental a bond. Argue with your friend and tomorrow he may no longer be your

friend, but argue with your brother and tomorrow he is still your brother. The book of Genesis is full of sibling rivalries but they do not all end the same way. The story of Cain and Abel ends with Abel dead. The story of Isaac and Ishmael ends with their standing together at Abraham's grave. The story of Esau and Jacob reaches a climax when, after a long separation, they meet, embrace and go their separate ways. The story of Joseph and his brothers begins with animosity but ends with forgiveness and reconciliation. Even the most dysfunctional families can eventually come together.

The Jewish people remains a family, often divided, always argumentative, but bound in a common bond of fate nonetheless. As our parsha reminds us, that person who has fallen is our brother or sister, and ours must be the hand that helps them rise again. [1] Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:2. [2] Mechilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Ex. 19:6. [3] Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Reflections on the French Revolution: The Harvard Classics, 1909–14. [4] Democracy in America, Chapter XVII: Principal causes which tend to maintain the democratic republic in the United States.

[Proclaiming Dror Throughout the Land by Rabbi Michael Rothbaum](https://truah.org/resources/michael-rothbaum-behar-bechukotai-moraltorah2023/)
<https://truah.org/resources/michael-rothbaum-behar-bechukotai-moraltorah2023/>

My Jewish name is Rachmiel. I'm named after my great aunt Rokhl or, as she would come to be known in this country, Aunt Rose. She was an immigrant garment worker, like her sister Ruth, my grandmother, and their brothers and sisters, who endured painstaking daily labor to put clothing on the backs of their American neighbors.

Which raises the question: Why leave behind everything you know for a life of toil in a strange land?

If you've ever met (or been) a Jewish immigrant to the U.S., the answer may be obvious. This country held out the promise of a paycheck, the promise of freedom from Jew-haters in Europe. And the promise of a new home.

For my family — and maybe for yours — this land rang a loud and clear bell for freedom, for liberty. I'm not talking a metaphorical bell. There was a real bell. It was *called* the Liberty Bell. It even had a quote from Torah on it, a quote taken from this week's parshah:

"Ukratem dror ba'aretz, l'chol yoshveha." "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants in it." (Leviticus 25:10)

What is this *dror*, the call for liberty, so powerful that it was cast in the very metal of that old bell?

For this land's colonial ancestors, the reasons remain cloudy. All we know for certain is that, in 1752, Pennsylvania assembly speaker Isaac Norris asked the assembly's agent in London, Robert Charles, to buy a bell. His messages

instructed Charles to inscribe the bell “with the following words well shaped in large letters round in vitz ...proclaim Liberty thro’ all the Land to all the Inhabitants thereof. – Levit. XXV.10.”

In modern American politics, folks get a lot of mileage out of the word “liberty.” It can mean a lot of things. Maybe the liberty to hoard firearms. Or the liberty to make as much profit as possible. Or liberty from “excess regulation.”

But the Jewish definition of liberty, of this Hebrew word *dror*, is specific.

Liberation from bondage.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehudah says *dror* [refers to] “a person who can *medayyer*, who can live wherever they want, and do their business in the whole country.”

(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 9b)

Freedom of movement — *of course* that would be the Jewish definition of liberty.

The immigrant experience is part of the Jewish DNA.

Which means that modern American politics have alienated the word *dror* from the Jewish concept of liberty. The bell celebrates the Jewish text inscribed on it, but also appropriates it. Especially as it is used today, this American concept of liberty is a grotesque midrash, swamping the *p’shat* — the simple meaning — of our parshah underneath a laissez-faire gloss.

We can count it as a blessing that the Jewish facility with text, our malleable midrashic imagination, imbued another American symbol with profound Jewish values — even as it lent the object itself a deeper immediacy and salience.

Schoolchildren are taught that the monument we now know as the “Statue of Liberty” was a gift from France. Created to celebrate the Enlightenment, the statue’s original title was philosophical: *Liberty Enlightening the World*. Given those rarified ambitions, it’s perhaps no surprise that, at first, the gift was not deeply cherished by its recipients. In fact, philanthropists had to scramble to procure funds to purchase a pedestal for the statue.

That’s where Emma Lazarus enters the story. Tasked with penning a poem befitting the pedestal, Lazarus completely reimagined the statue through her poem, “The New Colossus.” Shifting emphasis from philosopher to refugee, Lazarus explicitly rejects “storied pomp” and “ancient lands” in favor of “huddled masses,” human beings deemed by their host countries to be “wretched refuse.”

It is scarcely surprising that New York’s high-society benefactors did not see fit to read the poem aloud at the statue’s dedication. But Lazarus’ work had already been done. The lady with the torch was no longer a metaphor. She was now “Lady Liberty,” lifting a literal beacon to welcome refugees.

With her poem, Lazarus both reinvented the statue and gave it purpose, a purpose both Jewish and American. Poetically restoring what the deracinated quote on the Liberty Bell has stolen, the Statue of Liberty extends to the world a global *yovel*, a

universal jubilee. It is the *dror* that Rabbi Yehudah had promised, the freedom of a person to “live wherever they want, and do their business in the whole country.” Like all moderns, we live in an arena characterized by a constant struggle over the meaning of words that evoke powerful emotions: justice and virtue, morality and valor, honor and liberty. As Jews living in free societies, we are uniquely qualified to participate in this work. It is when we stand proudly for the liberatory power in our sacred texts, when we utilize our tradition of meaning-making to advance Jewish justice values, that we step into the fullness of that mission. *(Rabbi Michael Rothbaum is spiritual leader of Congregation Bet Haverim, a Reconstructionist community founded by the Jewish LGBTQ community in Atlanta, GA, rooted in the foundational work of the pursuit of justice and radical welcoming. He lives in the Summerhill section of Atlanta with his husband, Yiddish singer Anthony Russell.)*

Below are two separate commentaries. One is for Behar and the other Bechukotai.

Behar: The Mitzvah of Shemita by Rabbi Noam Yehuda Sender

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/18-parshat-behar-the-mitzvah-of-shmita>

Before the sin of Adam and Chava, the earth provided sustenance, not through the plotting and plowing of people, but rather through tefillah. In the Talmud, Rav Assi explains that the vegetation would not break through the earth until Adam came along and prayed to Hashem to have mercy on the earth. The rains fell and the earth sprouted.[1] The removal of the fruit from the Eitz Hada’at can be interpreted as a decision to derive pleasure from Hashem’s Earth without thought to the consequences it would bring. As a result, humankind’s working of the land was no longer within the context of safeguarding it; and thus, the earth is cursed, sprouting thorns and thistles, only giving forth its fruit by the sweat of our brow. In Parshat Behar, the mitzvah of shemita is discussed. Here, Hashem enables a return to the ideal relationship between humankind and creation.

The halachot relating to the shemita year are numerous and complex, but there are four general commandments in the Torah from which they are derived.[2]

- 1.The land should rest, as it says “and the land shall rest a Shabbat to Hashem.”[3] It is humanity’s responsibility to return all of creation into a proper relationship with Hashem. Through our refraining from planting, pruning, plowing, harvesting or any other form of working the land, the land is allowed to rest and move towards achieving a Shabbat.
- 2.We must declare all seventh-year produce hefker—ownerless, and free for all to take and enjoy.
- 3.We must sanctify all seventh-year produce. We are prohibited to do any

business whatsoever with the produce and obligated to ensure that it is consumed properly and equitably and does not go to waste.

4. We must absolve all loans from one Jew to another.

The conscious and meticulous observance of these laws and their rabbinic applications expands our awareness to the true nature of reality. The mandated abstinence from physical and commercial control of the land, and the positive commandment to relinquish all sense of ownership of its produce, free us from the enslavement of the constant pursuit of material goods and wealth. It dispels the illusion that physical acquisitions serve as a testament to our existence.

Additionally, the Sabbatical year provides ample time to contemplate and understand that it is not through the strength or the might of our hand that the earth brings forth its fruits. This not only instills a deeper sense of faith and trust in Hashem, but it allows a shift in how we relate to the earth. The earth must be viewed as a precious gift that has been entrusted to us and, therefore, we must treat it in a caring and sustainable manner.

The lessons we draw from shemitah are vital today as we dangerously toy with destroying the beautiful world we have been given. One example is the deforestation of vast portions of the earth's most essential ecosystems in order to support the growing demand for beef.[4] The "slash and burn" method of clearing land for agriculture, employed globally, by both small and large-scale cattle farmers, involves cutting the vegetation of a plot of land and allowing it to dry, at which point it is burned. The land is then cultivated for a few seasons, and eventually abandoned, left fallow for cattle pasture. Though this process may release nutrients which fertilize the soil, it is only sustainable on a small scale and on nutrient-rich soil. When applied on an industrial level to nutrient-poor soil, like the current situation in the Amazon Rainforest, the result is an ecological disaster [5]. As Richard Robbins puts it,

Hundreds of thousands of acres of tropical forests in Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, to name just a few countries, have been leveled to create pasture for cattle. Since most of the forest is cleared by burning, the extension of cattle pasture also creates carbon dioxide, and, according to some environmentalists, contributes significantly to global warming. [6]

Such operations lead to erosion and remove all nutrients from the soil, leaving it desolate. The result is severe damage to the biodiversity of the rainforest, an increase in the release of carbon dioxide, and general biosphere instability. [7]

Instead of being elevated and sanctified, the earth has become trampled and disgraced. The frightening ecological reality we are facing morally obligates us to rethink our relationship with the land and the consequences of our actions. Many of our actions may be deriving pleasure from Hashem's earth without paying

attention to the drastic consequences they bring.

Yet even with the damage humanity has caused, shemita teaches us that we must have faith that Hashem is in control, waiting for us to return from our careless and selfish ways. We must also know that the fluttering of the wings of any change in our relationship with creation on the physical dimension will cause a ripple effect in the spiritual worlds.

The mitzvah of shemita provides insight into one of the most puzzling episodes in the Torah. As B'nei Yisrael prepare themselves in the desert to enter Eretz Yisrael, Miriam Hanevi'ah passes away and the miraculous source of water that had sustained the people goes dry. Hashem commands Moshe to carry out one more miraculous act to instill the true nature of the relationship with the land of Israel deep within the consciousness of the new generation. Hashem tells Moshe to speak to the rock to bring forth water. On this verse, Rav Simcha Meir Cohen of Dvinsk (Eastern Europe, 1843-1926), in his sefer, Meshech Chochmah, says Hashem wanted B'nei Yisrael to experience the Divine Speech flowing through Moshe's mouth, drawing even inanimate objects towards Hashem's will. The intention was for them to "see that which is heard"[8] in a similar manner to the awesome revelation at Mount Sinai where "the entire people saw the Voices." [9] This incomprehensible act would significantly strengthen their faith in Hashem's Providence over all. As a manifestation of this new-found emunah, they would also understand that this holy land, which they were about to enter, is not a land that is conquered, used and abused by the sticks wielded by humans. Rather, Eretz Yisrael is a celestial land, which will pour forth its abundant blessing according to the tefillah spilling from the lips of the Jewish people, a people who are sensitive and respectful to the needs of all of Hashem's creation.

Moshe, possibly shaken by the death of his dear sister and frustrated with the complaints of the people, tragically strikes the rock. Hashem rebukes Moshe and Aharon and says "because you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them." [10] Because they failed to express the sanctity of a proper relationship with the Land based on pure emunah in Hashem and not human strength, they could not lead B'nei Yisrael in.

When the Torah introduces shemita, it says "Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai saying." [11] Rashi asks "Why is shemita mentioned [specifically] by Har Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot said at Sinai?" In truth, living a life of shemita consciousness is a constant reenactment of receiving the Torah at Sinai. Hashem gave us the Torah so that we could sanctify and reveal the truth of all of creation through the passionate and dedicated observance of the mitzvot. And so, when we come to a proper relationship with the earth and give it proper rest and

respect through the mitzvah of the shemittah year, the splendor of its divinity is revealed. Should we choose to view the mitzvah of shemittah in a sophisticated and all-encompassing manor, we may be zoachim to bring the world closer to a healthy and holy state. *(Noam Yehuda Sendor, originally from Sharon, Massachusetts, was blessed with the opportunity to study at various diverse seminaries in Israel. Most recently he studied at Yeshivat Torat Yosef Hamivtar in Efrat, where he received his Rabbinical ordination. He currently lives in Melbourne, Australia with his wife and three children, where he serves as the Campus Rabbi at the Leibler Yavneh College and the Assistant Rabbi at the Hamayan Shul.)*

[1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin 60b [2] Sefer HaShemittah, HaRav Yechiel Michel Tukachinski (Mossad HaRav Kook). [3] Vayikra 25:2 [4] This is in addition to the inherent health issues with eating too much beef, and other practices of the meat industry which cause health and environmental problems. [5] Slash and burn techniques have also been historically used by indigenous tribes, including those in the Amazon forest, to create very small plots of ground for growing crops for a few years. Because of the small plots and small, scattered populations, the effect on the forest dynamics was much less (but still evident) than that done in today's more industrial cattle farming. [6] Richard Robbins, Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism (Allyn and Bacon, 1999) p.220 [7] Wikipedia [8] Cohen, Rav Meir Simcha Meshech Chochmah (Even Yisrael) pg. 297 (Parshat Chukat). [9] Shemot 20:15 [10] Bamidbar 20:12 [11] Vayikra 25:1-5

[Bechukotai: The Blessing of Rain by Rabbi Yonatan Neril](https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/25-parshat-bechukotai-the-blessing-of-rain)

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/25-parshat-bechukotai-the-blessing-of-rain>

Tefillah for rain is a key part of the spiritual life of a Jew. For almost half of the year, our daily prayers include praise of Hashem as the One “Who makes the wind blow and the rain descend” and a request that Hashem will “give dew and rain for a blessing.”[1] A special blessing for rain appears in the liturgy on Shemini Atzeret, at the beginning of Israel’s rainy season. We pray that Hashem brings beneficial rain, which falls at the right time, to nourish our crops and fill our reservoirs. As the Talmud says, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created.”[2]

The Torah teaches that our actions impact the rain as well. At the beginning of this week’s parsha, Parshat Bechukotai, we read that rainfall is a function of our doing Hashem’s will. If we keep the Torah, Hashem says, “I will give your rains in their time, the land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit... you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land, and I will grant peace in the land.”[3] This promise of abundant rains and prosperity is followed by a warning that, should Israel ignore the Torah, Hashem will “make your skies like iron,” the Midrash defining this as ceasing all rains and bringing drought.[4] Conversely, the fact that we specifically ask that the rain be “for a blessing,” acknowledges that too much rain is just as dangerous as not

having enough. In a number of instances in the Tanach, Hashem sent rain that was a curse, not a blessing. The Flood came to punish the generation for transgressing Hashem's will. Rashi explains that the rains of blessing only became a destructive flood when the people refused to do teshuva.[5] In the time of Shmuel Hanavi, Hashem brought thunder and rain to chastise the people.[6] For centuries, it was a core principle of Jewish faith that the natural world was a domain within the spiritual world, not an entity outside its purview. With a modern scientific understanding that human actions affect the quality and quantity of the rain, the warning of Bechukotai warrants our attention. We must reawaken the awareness that our actions impact the entire planet.

The effect of industrialized society on rain through pollutants has been well-known for decades—we've all heard of acid rain. In the 21st century, our impact on the rain is becoming even more pronounced. A consensus of scientists states that human-caused climate change is increasing storm intensity and raising the seas. By burning fossil fuels in our cars, homes, factories, and planes, we are increasing the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere.

We not only affect how rain descends, but also how that rain impacts the land when it does fall. With increasing urbanization in the world, land that once soaked up rainwater is being covered in pavement, which prevents the rainwater from replenishing underground aquifers (also referred to as "groundwater" or "the water table"). Aquifers directly provide more than one-third of drinking water in America, and contribute, in some part, to all drinking water sources.[7] In some places, like Florida, aquifers provide 100% of the drinking water as well as the majority of clean water for industrial and agricultural use.[8] When rainwater is prevented from replenishing the water table, one of our most necessary resources—clean drinking water—is compromised.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the amount of U.S. land covered by sprawling urban development increased by 50% during the 1980s and 1990s.[9] Increased building covers the land with impervious paving, which prevents the land from absorbing rains back into the water table. Unabsorbed rainwater becomes runoff, flowing through drainage systems (or causing floods when drains and sewers are overburdened), picking up pollutants along the way, which are then dumped into lakes, streams and oceans. Atlanta, which was struck by a major drought in 2007, leads American cities in lost rainwater, with up to 132.8 billion gallons lost per year.[10] The volume of water lost in the United States each year would provide tens of millions of people their annual water needs. Impacting large urban areas like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Toronto,[11] this new reality is also quite pronounced in Israel. In a matter of decades, a near-continuous urban settlement will stretch from the northern coast to the southern

coast, from Nahariya to Tel Aviv to Ashkelon to Gaza.[12] Another urban belt extends for miles from north, south, and east of Yerushalayim. Travel to any population center in Israel today and you will see the massive infrastructure work being done on roads and highways, adding more impervious paving to a land that is already living at the edge of a water crisis. Israel's water resources are so limited (and disputed) that we cannot afford to deprive the coastal and mountain aquifers of precious rainwater.

Today we have an unbelievably complex understanding of how the earth's systems work, and how we impact them. In viewing the connection between humans and the environment through scientific analysis and statistics, we must be careful not to forget the true lesson of Bechukotai—Hashem has created the world in such a way that when we contradict Hashem's will by living out of balance, our lives are thrown out of balance in response. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag (Ba'al Hasulam), a leading kabbalist of the twentieth century, wrote that Hashem established the laws of nature in the world, and a person or society that transgresses one of these laws will be punished by means of nature.[13] We see from this that we cannot ignore the connection between our actions, both those of the general mitzvot and of caring for Hashem's earth, and the physical conditions which surround us.[14] Scientific explanations of storm patterns, aquifer absorption and rain toxicity should not obscure the influence of the HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Rather, they reveal to us the true greatness of Divine wisdom, and confirm that we really are obligated to live in balance with and be stewards of Hashem's Creation, as the Torah requires.

Praying for beneficial rain and then ignoring the problems of climate change and unchecked urban development is like praying for good health and then continuing to eat poorly and avoid exercise. We are acting against our own expressed interests when we excessively burn fossil fuels and contribute to unchecked urban expansion.

Our prayers for beneficial rain are extremely important, and our actions should be consistent with the emphasis of our tefillot. We must live as earnestly as we pray. By doing so, we can give our children the gift of a world that is blessed, as Hashem promises, with rains of abundance, prosperity and peace. *(Yonatan Neril is an interfaith environmental advocate, NGO director, and rabbi. He is the founder and current director of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, a non-profit organization based in Jerusalem.)*

[1] Translation adapted from Artscroll Siddur [2] Talmud Bavli, Mesechet Ta'anit 8b, Artscroll translation. [3] Vayikra 26:4-6. All translations of verses from the Torah are from Judaica Press, [4] Torath Kohanim 26:28, as cited by Rashi to Vayikra 26:19. Ramban on Vayikra 24:4 discusses how beneficial rain improves human health and increases produce. He calls this blessing of the rains "the greatest of all blessings." [5] Based on the Midrash Hane'elam and the Zohar Chadash 28a. Translation by Artscroll Rashi Chumash [6] I Shmuel 12:17-18

[7] "Paving our way to water shortages: How sprawl aggravates drought." [8] See the report on Florida's aquifers [9] According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Inventory. (see footnote 8) [10] Co-operative study [11] See, for example, a series on Toronto's urban sprawl. [12] See "Open Space in Israel," Israel Environment Bulletin, vol. 29, Sept. 2005 [13] From "The Need for Caution in the Laws of Nature," (in Hebrew) in Matan Torah, publisher Da'at Ohr HaGanuz, year unknown, p. 96-99. In Gematria (a mystical numbering system), the letters of the word 'hateva' (the nature), add up to the same amount (86) as G-d's name that connotes judgment—Elokim. Rabbi Ashlag teaches that this implies that the laws of G-d can be called by the name 'commandments of nature.' He does not write about transgressing the 'laws of nature' in the context of ecological issues, but in the context of an individual isolating themselves from society. The application of Rabbi Ashlag's teachings here to ecology, a discipline that developed after Rabbi Ashlag lived, is by the author of this dvar Torah and not by Rabbi Ashlag himself. I would like to thank Rabbi Adam Perlman for pointing me to this source and teaching the linkage to environmental issues. [14] In this vein, the emphasis of Bechukotai on the linkage between keeping the Torah and beneficial rains is different than Rav Ashlag's understanding of a connection between proper action and 'the laws of nature.' Nevertheless, a similarity does exist in both the Torah portion's and Rav Ashlag's emphasis on the relation between human action and what happens in the natural world around us. [15] The following suggestions are taken from Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz, "Water Conservation and Halacha: An Unorthodox Approach." Compendium of Sources on Halakha and the Environment. Canfei Nesharim, 2005.

[Growing Into Torah by Megan Goldmarche](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/growing-into-torah/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/growing-into-torah/>

Ice breakers and Torah are two of my favorite things. At my Shabbat dinner table each week, I come up with a question related to the parashah that encourages guests to consider the relevance of Torah to their daily lives and to share something personal and brief. For example, for this week's parashiyot, Behar-Behukkotai, I might ask: What is something that you took or borrowed from someone that you know it is time to return, perhaps because it is the right thing to do or because it will make you feel lighter? This can be a physical thing like a book or shirt, or something intangible like the hope or support you received from someone. If you are hosting shabbat dinner this week I encourage you to try it out, with a brief explanation of the ideas of Jubilee and returning land to its original owners that appears in this week's parashah.

Now I should not have needed to review the parashah to come up with this question because in May 1997, Behar was my bat mitzvah portion. And yet every year when these parashiyot come around, together or separately, I feel a bit of shame. I do not remember chanting the words or studying them. I do not remember if they spoke to me or what I said about them from the bimah. What I do remember is Cantor Brindell, of blessed memory, who went into the hospital in the hours after my service and died on Shabbat morning the following

week, teaching me the trope for the haftarah. I remember its opening words, *“And Jeremiah said that the word of God came to him saying . . . ” (Jer. 32:6)*. I remember being so proud to lead a service in front of my family, friends, and all the other middle schoolers I invited to the service. I remember relatives coming in from near and far, and I remember my mom on the bimah speaking to me in her official role as synagogue president.

And so I find myself 26 years later, 9 years into my rabbinate, going back to the words that I must have studied with the rabbi, trying to figure out what messages I forgot, or missed, all those years ago.

Reading through it, I can see why the portion didn't quite speak to me. Slavery and the creation of a slightly more moral system than the norm in the ancient world are major themes. I suspect my pre-teen self said, “I guess Torah is sort of outdated” and moved on. Rereading it today, I can easily notice relevant concepts such as shemittah, giving the land a Shabbat-like rest, and the jubilee year when we return land to folks who have become disenfranchised and prevent systemic inequality. These concepts are relevant to me today because observing Shabbat has given shape to my week, the year I spent observing a modern shemittah with JTS classmates^[1] shaped my relationship with the origins of my food, and learning about systemic injustice has shown how radical the return of land could be. I do not blame the educators, because while I did not receive the message that my Torah portion was filled with relevant wisdom, I received a more important message loud and clear: Judaism, its people, culture, and rituals, are deeply meaningful and relevant. The friendships, the cycle of holidays, the marking of time, I never once questioned that my life had more joy and meaning because I was part of the Jewish people.

Today I meet many young people who have not been taught Judaism's relevance to their lives. They have not had the chance to live the Jewish calendar, to build strong Jewish friendships, to feel pride in belonging to something that sets them apart from others and knowing what beliefs or behaviors set them apart.

In my work as a community rabbi, first at Hillel and now leading a Jewish community organization for 20s and 30s in the Philadelphia area, I have taken on the mandate to convey this message: that Judaism is relevant, exciting, and meaningful—not just as an identity that they can name but as a way of life that shapes the choices they make and how they spend their time. Teaching the words of the Torah in one-off and ongoing classes is one way we do this. We also model the values of shemittah and jubilee, such as giving time for self-care, running programs on environmentalism, and pushing for economic justice. We try to make the Jewish calendar accessible and fun through holiday celebrations. And we hope that if one of the young people we serve is in trouble, they will turn to

each other, as our parashah models: “If one of your kin is in straits and has to sell part of a holding, the nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what that relative has sold” (Lev. 25:25).

In my 20s I led a lot of Birthright trips and each trip would have 5–10 folks who decided to have an adult b’nei mitzvah ceremony on the trip. I would often say, too many people see the b’nei mitzvah as the end of Jewish education, and as the pinnacle of Jewish living. 12 or 13 is too young for that, and so are 18 or 22 or 25. There is no age which should serve as the culmination of our Jewish education. If we are lucky we will have the chance to go back to each parashah and holiday for decades, noticing new things about the texts and rituals, and about ourselves and our communities each year.

This is one of the biggest blessings of our calendar, the chance to go back year after year to the same texts and rituals and continuously analyze, critique, and celebrate these gifts of the Jewish inheritance. In this week’s second parashah, Behukkotai, the Torah shares some of the blessings and challenges of our covenant with God and states “I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12). What a gift to have our entire lives to connect with God’s presence in new ways, through text, community, and practice, in our ever-renewing commitment to God’s everlasting covenant.

(Megan Goldmarch is Executive Director, Tribe 12 which is an organization that connects people in their 20s/30s to Jewish life and community in Philadelphia today so they will choose to stay connected tomorrow.)

Yahrtzeits

*Ilisia Kissner remembers her aunt Sadye Rosenblum on Saturday May 13th.

*Daniel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Myrna Zwillenberg on Sunday May 14th

*Sylvia Orenstein (and all of Kol Rina) remember her husband Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Tuesday May 16th.

*Nikki Pusan and Russett Feldman remember their cousin Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Tuesday May 16th.

*Francesca and Cornelia Peckman remember their mother Melita Peckman on Friday May 19th